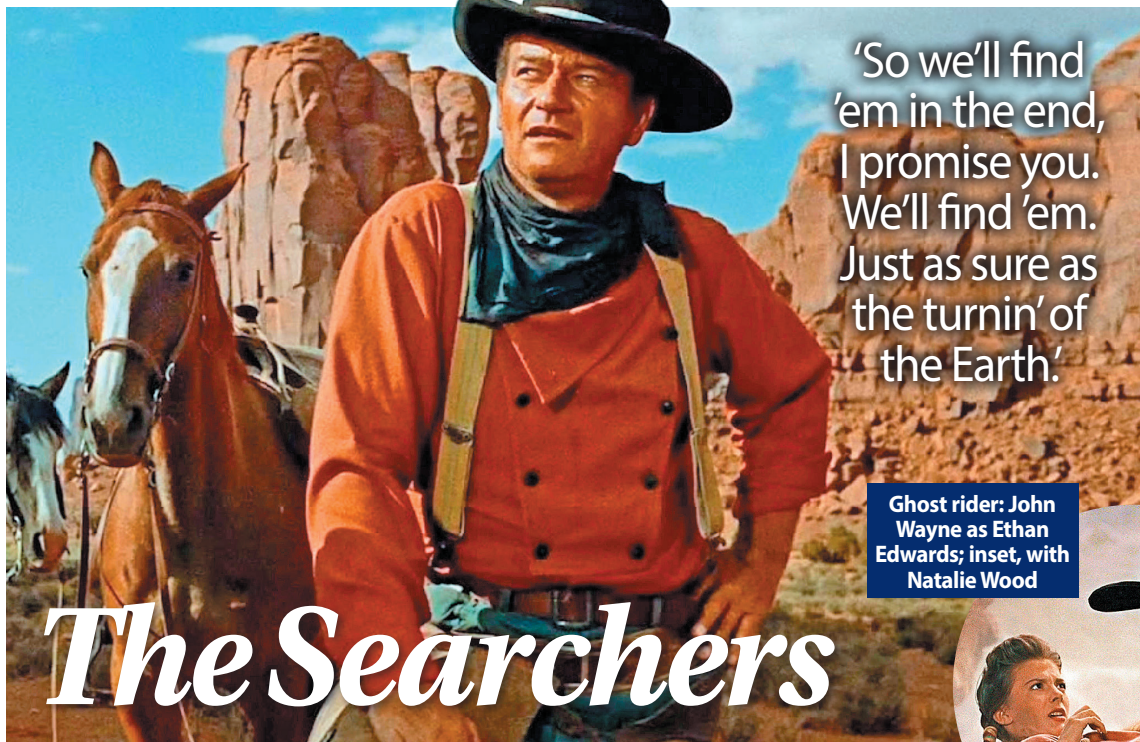
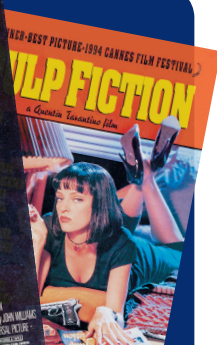


# THIS WEEK'S CLASSIC MOVIE

by Madeline Pritchard



## The Searchers

'So we'll find 'em in the end, I promise you. We'll find 'em. Just as sure as the turnin' of the Earth.'

Ghost rider: John Wayne as Ethan Edwards; inset, with Natalie Wood



Perhaps the defining film of both John Wayne and John Ford's careers, 1956's *The Searchers* stars Wayne as Ethan Edwards, a Confederate soldier who 'never surrendered' – and who has now returned to his brother's homestead after years wandering the West.

Each frame is perfectly composed, as though Ford and cinematographer Winton C Hoch simply picked up horses, men and mountains and set them down where they liked. But this beauty belies the sheer horror of the story. After his brother's family is killed by Comanches, Ethan sets out on a deranged, obsessive quest to find his kidnapped niece and settle the score. Driven by hatred and fear, he kills every Native American who crosses his path, Comanche or not. When they come upon a Comanche

grave, he shoots out the dead man's eyes, to prevent him from finding his way to the afterlife. And, when he finally finds his niece (Natalie Wood), now all grown up and wife to Comanche chief Scar, she runs from him in fear, and it feels, briefly, as he holds her in the air, as if he might dash her head against the rocks.

Ford's intentions are difficult to characterise – does he mean to condemn men like Ethan, to portray his racist acts as both brutal

and needless? Perhaps Ethan is representative of America itself – a country with a national identity forged in opposition to a conquered people? Although Wayne's troubled character is drawn with some care, the film also features extended comic scenes surrounding his companion's accidental betrothal to a Native American woman, Look (Beulah Archuletta), who speaks almost no English and

who is suddenly and unceremoniously killed. Look is a caricature who exists only for laughs; she exemplifies the racism that is baked into the very fabric of the picture.

For his part, Wayne seems to have had at least a little in common with Ethan. In one of the more egregiously ugly

moments in Oscars history, the star had to be restrained by six men when, in 1973, Sacheen Littlefeather took to the stage on Marlon Brando's behalf to reject his Oscar and call for better representation for indigenous people in cinema.

Ford responded badly to questions surrounding his intentions or his considerable artistry – when asked by Peter Bogdanovich how he had filmed the land rush in *3 Bad Men*, he replied, 'with a camera.' But even if Ford himself might have rejected the suggestion that he was anything more than

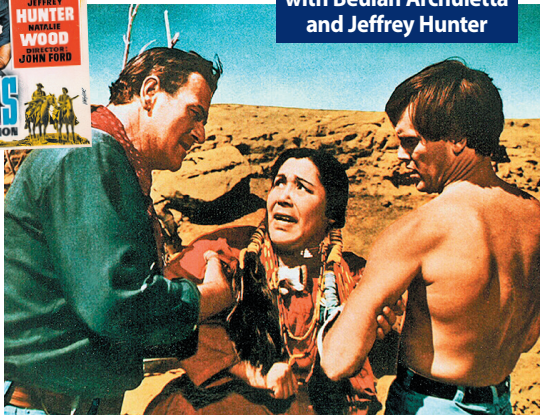
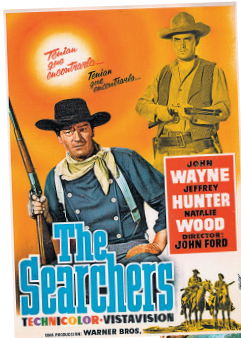
a mere journeyman, there can be no question over the profound impact his work had on US cinema.

The New Hollywood generation – including Bogdanovich, Paul Schrader, Martin Scorsese and Steven

Spielberg – were teenagers when *The Searchers* was released, and its influence on them is clear. *Taxi Driver* follows another lost, lonely, hateful man, another veteran seeking purpose in the rescue of a young girl who may not actually need his help.

The final shot of *The Searchers* – Wayne framed alone in a doorway after his companions have gone inside, the West stretching behind him, as if he were more dust than man – has become iconic. As Scorsese later wrote in *The Hollywood Reporter*: 'Only an artist as great as John Ford would dare to end a film on such a note. In its final moment, *The Searchers* suddenly becomes a ghost story. Ethan's sense of purpose has been fulfilled, and like the man whose eyes he's shot out, he's destined to wander forever between the winds.'

Wednesday ■ TCM ■ 4.20pm



Comic relief? Wayne with Beulah Archuletta and Jeffrey Hunter